

PhD mobility ebbs and flows, but most graduates return¹

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With 190 million inhabitants and about 592,000 foreign-born residents, Brazil is a relatively closed society, in spite of a long history of African slave trade until the mid-19th century and large inflows of Italian, German, Portuguese and Japanese immigrants until World War I.

Today, most of the immigrants come from Portugal, Japan, Italy, Spain and border countries such as Paraguay, Bolivia, Argentina and Uruguay. About a fifth – 140,000 – have higher education degrees, coming mostly from Portugal, Italy, Argentina and Spain, according to data from the 2010 National Household Census.

Brazil graduates about 12,000 doctoral students a year in its universities, up from 4,000 in 1998, and they go on to work mostly in the higher education sector and research (77%). Most of the degrees are obtained in Brazil's main universities, including the state universities of São Paulo and Campinas and the federal universities of Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais, according to Ministry of Science and Technology figures.

Between 1996 and 2006, the Centre for Strategic Studies and Management Science reported in 2010 (CGEE 2010), Brazilian institutions granted 50,000 doctoral degrees. Of these, only 680 were to people born outside the country, the largest number being from Argentina (126), Portugal (80) and Chile (59).

Brazilian students abroad

There is also a constant flow of Brazilians going to get their degrees abroad, mostly with fellowships from national agencies. In the early 1990s, Brazilian agencies used to support about 2,000 doctoral students a year abroad.

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As the number of doctoral programmes in the country increased, the number of doctoral fellowships for study abroad went down, but other kinds of fellowships were introduced.

In 2009, there were 3,760 Brazilians with fellowships abroad, 783 of them in doctoral programmes, 1,910 in 'sandwich' programmes – students enrolled in doctoral courses in Brazil go abroad for a year or so – and 1,067 in postdoctoral activities.

In 2011 the Brazilian government announced the 'Science Without Borders' programme, which intended to send 100,000 students abroad in the next four years.

Most of these fellowships were for short-term periods for undergraduates, but about 10,000 were for doctoral programmes – 2,500 a year – which would mean a return to the levels of the early 1990s (Castro, Barros, Ito-Adler, and Schwartzman 2012). This initiative was limited to the natural sciences, the assumption being that the social sciences and humanities would continue to receive support outside the programme.

Recent data showed that 'Science Without Borders' had already provided 22,000 fellowships, of which 5,000 were for study in the US, 3,000 in Portugal and 2,500 in Spain. Of the total, only 825 were for full doctoral programmes, and 2,300 were for postdocs.

Figures from the Institute of International Education in the United States show that in 2011-12 there were about 9,000 Brazilian students in the US, marking a small but steady increase but still far behind student numbers from China, India, Korea and even Mexico.

Brain drain has not been a problem

In contrast to India, China and, in Latin America, Mexico and Argentina, Brazil does not suffer from a steady outflow of educated citizens. In the past, most Brazilians going abroad for doctoral studies with fellowships kept their jobs and returned to better positions in their original institutions (Glaser and Habers 1978).

In the 1980s, as the economy stagnated, thousands of Brazilians moved to the United States, Portugal and Japan – the dekaseguis – for temporary work in unskilled activities, and many returned as the economy improved from the 1990s (Carvalho 2004).

The estimate is that there are now about 1.5 million Brazilians abroad. Today, those going abroad with government fellowships for advanced studies have to agree to return or pay back their fellowships, and international agreements assure that they do not gain resident status in the countries of study.

However, there is no assurance that they will get a proper job on their return, although there are short-term fellowships that can be granted to returning scholars willing to work in public universities.

The most recent Survey of Earned Doctorates of the US National Academy of Sciences found that of 149 new Brazilian PhD graduates with temporary visas in the US, 42% intended to stay – a smaller proportion than for other Latin American countries in the region (Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia), all with about 60% wanting to stay, or for India or China, with around 80% intending to stay.

It is not certain that those willing to say abroad will actually stay, but in the end it is not sanction or fines, but the provision of proper working opportunities, that will bring those studying abroad back home.

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